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SUBJECT: WHAT'S (NOT) AVAILABLE AT HANOI'S BOOKSTORES

11. (U) Summary: Government controls continue to ensure that both imported and locally printed books stay within acceptable bounds. Fictional works increasingly are the most popular offerings in Hanoi's bookstores, instead of previous foci on ideological or political titles. Some political publications persist -- still heavy on Ho Chi Minh Thought and Marxism -- but offerings on controversial political and economic issues appear non-existent. Market forces appear to be winning out over ideology. End Summary.

BIG BROTHER LIVES

12. (U) On July 15, the Ministry of Culture and Information (MOCI) suspended operations of a weekly student magazine (Sinh Vien Vietnam) for, inter alia, lampooning Vietnamese currency by showing a banknote flushing down a toilet, as well as for publishing cover pictures of naked male and female statues from Vietnam's ancient Cham relics. In May, the Committee to Protect Journalists (based in New York) listed Vietnam as one of the 10 worst places in the world to be a journalist.

13. (U) MOCI's Publishing Department has the responsibility for monitoring and approving all publications officially brought into or published in Vietnam. Procedurally, for non-political and social works, importers must only inform the Publishing Department of their imports; for political publications, however, the procedures are much stricter. A senior official from the state-run Vietnam General Corporation on Import-Export of Books and Periodicals (aka "Xunhasaba") explained that publishers must submit samples of all proposed imports for approval to MOCI, including summaries of the contents. Xunhasaba reports to the MOCI's Publishing Department, which has responsibility for reviewing the contents of all publications in Vietnam.

14. (U) Importers may only proceed with written permission from MOCI. These procedures apply even for state offices, government agencies, think tanks, and libraries. Publishing houses must also follow similar procedures before printing individual publications. In practice, however, many publishers increasingly neglect seeking permission for non-sensitive themes. One Xunhasaba official commented, however, that "even bold publishers exercise caution and follow the requirements when it comes to political-social books."

15. (U) One professor from the Institute of Historical Science opined that censorship with respect to printed publications has encouraged more people to access the Internet for news and current issues, rather than reading "well-edited," out-of-date publications. He noted that firewalls do not appear to be a significant barrier.

WHO'S SELLING WHAT

16. (U) Hanoi has six major state-run bookstores downtown, along with numerous smaller, privately run bookstores in different neighborhoods. Three of the four largest and most comprehensive bookstores are affiliates of the Hanoi Books Distribution Corporation, and are located in the central business district. Two other bookstores are Xunhasaba showrooms. There is a small English-language bookshop run by a foreigner, as well as ubiquitous street stalls run by Vietnamese entrepreneurs, who usually specialize in periodicals, soft-back publications, and foreign languages textbooks. Publications at these outlets are usually sold at much cheaper prices -- 15 to 30 pct lower -- compared with those at state-run bookstores, because they are often illegally produced and not copyright-compliant.

17. (U) Entryways at Hanoi's major bookstores usually showcase literary works, with short stories and fiction translated from foreign languages predominant. Pearl Buck, Alfred Hitchcock, Agatha Christie, George Simenon, Conan Doyle, Danielle Steele, Sidney Sheldon, Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Jack London are favorites. Vietnamese fiction is also widely available. In early 2003, Vietnamese readers rushed to buy new book of ghost stories, which authorities later banned. One of the reasons cited unofficially for the ban was that its co-author is a well-

known overseas Vietnamese speaker now living in Canada. Early in 2001, a book of fiction revolving around the lives of homosexuals was popular; apparently, it was the first time a gay theme was published and openly available in Vietnam.

18. (U) Vietnamese readers are usually denied the latest overseas literary works, perhaps attributable to substantial royalties required. Ho Chi Minh City-based Tre Publishing's director claimed in an interview that he had passed up JRR Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy because HarperCollins asked for "too much money." Nonetheless, Tre Publishing subsequently contracted to translate and publish the Harry Potter series, after agreeing to ten percent retail price as royalties. In early July, local newspapers reported that ninety per cent of the initial 30,000 copies of the latest Harry Potter title "Order of the Phoenix" sold out on July 21, the day of release in Vietnam. Local media claimed that Vietnam was the first country in the world to put out an authorized translation.

LITTLE POLITICAL OR ECONOMIC FARE

19. (U) Among political publications, collections of Vietnam's laws and regulations, the Constitution, criminal and labor codes, college textbooks on Ho Chi Minh's thought, and Marxist philosophy dominate. Less than ten per cent of political publications are biographical; of those, "The Complete Book of US Presidents," Winston Churchill's memoirs, biographies of Deng Xiaoping, Zhu Rongji, Hu Jintao, Mao Tse-tung, Bill Gates, Lee Kuan Yew, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Yasser Arafat, Vladimir Putin, and Yevgeni Primakov stand out, along with even separate biographies of Presidents Bush and Clinton.

10. (U) Surprisingly, few publications focus on Vietnam's most well known Communist figures; apart from Ho Chi Minh, General Vo Nguyen Giap, Le Duan (described as having actually led the Vietnam War), and former Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, few other revolutionaries or politicians are featured in biographies. Few of the existing biographies are very popular nowadays, according to shop assistants. According to one bookstore official, about 15 per cent of revenue nonetheless comes from political publications. There are scant titles on the Vietnam War, or war in general, although a recently published memoir of a former soldier and "Why Vietnam?" by Archimedes L. A. Patti are available.

11. (U) Historical publications are limited not only in quantity, but also type. Many of the books do not focus on any particular historical era but rather span decades or centuries in encyclopedic fashion. When Americans are depicted, it is sometimes still as savage killers, brandishing guns or military equipment with captions such as, "Kill! Kill! Kill!" On the Vietnamese side, there are usually many pictures displaying dead bodies. But the crowded aisles of management and economics books often feature American authors and examples.

12. (U) Books on religion are also scarce. The majority of such publications are about Buddhism, with a lesser collection on Confucianism. It is rare to find a book on Christianity, Islam, or other religions -- much less Bibles or a Koran -- other than in a reference-type book. In one large bookstore, there was a book with Jesus Christ on the cover. But the content focused on the life of Jesus rather than on Christianity itself.

13. (U) Publications about controversial subjects such as political pluralism or economic privatization are rare or non-existent in major bookshops. Apart from a handful of publications on the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement, there are few other publications on such topics or even about the major economies in the region, such as Japan and Korea. Nor are there books readily available about China's economic reforms or the writings of Deng Xiaoping, despite the clear similarity to Vietnam's ongoing efforts. Widely available, however, are economic textbooks, which refer to general, macro-principles, rather than to specific economic issues and problems.

14. (U) Shelves hold only a smattering of book titles on other current international issues. Before and during Iraq hostilities this year, two Vietnam News Agency-affiliated publishing houses produced two widely read publications addressing the operations and international opposition. Books about Osama bin Laden, 9/11, and international terrorism from 2001 remain available, although their popularity has peaked. Readers can also find books by Vietnamese scholars on "The US-Russia: Counterparts and Rivals," "Relations between the US and Big Nations in the Asia-Pacific Region," "Contemporary Capitalism: Inner Contradictions - Trends - Prospects," "Sino-Vietnamese Relations: Events during the 1991-2000 Period," "Japan:

Major Political Changes during the 1990s and Prospects," and "Development as Freedom" by 1998 Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen.

LITE LITERATURE

15. (U) Up to half the physical space at most major bookstores -- even at the main Political and Legal Bookshop -- in Hanoi is reserved for dictionaries, foreign language textbooks (most in English), children's books, and books on travel, cooking, and interior decoration. Book distributors declined to comment about revenue shares, but officials from Xunhasaba admitted that they have been importing large quantities of publications of this nature upon requests from their distributors. An even larger volume of publications of this nature is printed locally, and in Vietnamese.

16. (U) Comment: Vietnam's Doi Moi economic renovation process has created more opportunities for development and prosperity, enabling average people to seek out books on general knowledge and education, as well as entertainment. Even the state-owned sector is responding to these market demands and providing what the public wants -- rather than what it "should know." It is another sign of the decline of ideology in the lives of average Vietnamese, and a welcome sign of additional individual choice -- within carefully maintained bounds.

PORTER